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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO

Coping Mechanisms: An Improvised Opera for Non-Improvising Opera Singers

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Musical Arts

in

Contemporary Music Performance

by

Bonnie Elizabeth Lander

Committee in Charge:

Professor Anthony Burr, Co-Chair
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2017

This Dissertation of Bonnie Elizabeth Lander is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

Co-Chair

Co-Chair

University of California, San Diego

2017

DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation and the completion of my doctorate to the memory of my grandmother, Irene Kliszus née Aurahan.

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LIST OF SUPPLEMENTAL FILES

COPING_MECHANISMS.mp4
Maril_Aria_1.MOV
Maril_Aria_2.MOV
Halliday_Aria_1.MOV
Halliday_Aria_2.MOV

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Thank you to all the musicians who helped create this work including Rhymes With Opera members Elisabeth Halliday and Robert Maril who let me experiment with their voices, San Diego orchestra members Tommy Babin, Judith Hamann, and Kjell Nordeson, and New York orchestra members Jason Anastasoff, Dennis Sullivan, and Jeff Young.

Thank you to Cynthia Stokes for your direction, mentorship, and friendship in this piece. Thank you to Lily Bartenstein, who has been a special collaborator not only for this piece but for all of my theatrical productions at UC San Diego. Thank you to Robert Pierzak for all your help, love, and support over the years.

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Coping Mechanisms: An Improvised Opera for Non-Improvising Opera Singers

by

Bonnie Elizabeth Lander

Doctor of Musical Arts in Contemporary Music Performance

University of California, San Diego, 2017

Professor Anthony Burr, Co-Chair

Professor Anthony Davis, Co-Chair

Coping Mechanisms is a one act chamber opera by Bonnie Lander commissioned by Rhymes With Opera in 2015 for their 2017 spring main stage production. The piece is written specifically for the Rhymes With Opera singers, including Lander, Elisabeth Halliday, and Robert Maril with the intent of teaching

Halliday and Maril how to perform free improvisation. Two experiments were being explored from this work: 1) how does one combine free improvisation with classical opera 2) how does one teach opera singers to improvise?

These two questions marked the beginning of a two year workshopping process that culminated with the premier of this eerie, abstract, and engaging opera. This paper describes the narrative and conceptual structures that gave this piece shape, the style of improvisation that resulted, as well as information about the process and success of the piece.

Introduction

Coping Mechanisms is a one act improvised opera that premiered on April 4, 2017 in the Experimental Theater of the Conrad Prebys Music Center on the UC San Diego campus. The piece was performed by singers Elisabeth Halliday, Bonnie Lander, and Robert Maril (from Rhymes With Opera), and instrumentalists Tommy Babin, Judith Hamann, and Kjell Nordeson on bass, cello, and percussion respectively. The piece featured set and lighting design by Lily Bartenstein, with direction by Cynthia Stokes.

This piece was commissioned by New York City-based chamber ensemble Rhymes With Opera for its spring 2017 main stage and will be performed in New York City on May 19th and 20th 2017 at 124 Bank Street Theater. The musicians for the New York premier will be Jason Anastasoff, Dennis Sullivan, and Jeffrey Young on bass, percussion, and violin- respectively.

I had several goals while creating this piece: 1) to create an opera that blends my experiences as an opera singer and free improviser 2) to introduce the Rhymes With Opera singers Halliday and Maril to new vocal possibilities through improvisation 3) to experiment with how open the structure of an opera could be 4) to write a piece about the damnation of isolated domestic living.

In the program I wrote:

"*Coping Mechanisms* is an exploration of modern life interpreted as voluntary loneliness. I've met many people who react to hardship with various levels of retreat, only to find their pain exacerbated by the solitude. This piece attempts to highlight the frustration of this particular coping mechanism, and explores the physical and mental relationships to stress, anxiety, fear, and grief. "

Contemporary western society values isolation as source of comfort and

prestige: living alone is a luxury, the larger the distance between you and your neighbors the more status you have, the larger the bounds of your personal property, the "better off" you are. However, this emphasis on isolation as capital can lead to alienation, lack of community, and depression. Isolation can be a source of comfort in the form of solitude, but it can also register as punishment. Children are sent to their rooms to think about what they have done. Prisoners are punished with isolation for their behavior. Where is the line between your home being your castle or your prison?

In *Coping Mechanisms* the three performers explore the tension between isolation as both a gift and a curse over the course of three acts. Throughout these acts the singers are each coping with an un-named trauma unique to them while each act explores a different coping mechanism.

The program states:

"The three singers will first experience their grief viscerally in Act I. They will then try to process their grief through distance in Act II, and in Act III will explore the failures of their efforts.

In "Act 1: Reckoning" each singer performs how the body may cope with trauma, first through shock, and then a lament. In 'Act 2: Home', each singer attempts to cope with their trauma through deliberate isolation, only to be drawn deeper into their own worlds. In "Act 3: Failure" the singers cope with their frustration by destroying the sanctity of their isolation, eventually interacting face to face for the first time."

This narrative was reinforced by the improvised music of the performers and the orchestra. However, Halliday and Maril are not improvisers - they are both classically trained opera singers and colleagues of mine from the Peabody Institute in Baltimore, MD. Peabody has an extensive opera training program, rooted in classical tradition. However, Peabody also has a strong composition department and the three of us also were invested in the performance of new music. To date, as the Rhymes With Opera ensemble, we have premiered over seventeen works together. Despite our

experience together, this project provided a new challenge as Halliday and Maril had never improvised for a piece before.

Coping Mechanisms is part of a larger series of improvised works I call *Inside Voices*. In order to realize this piece, I needed to teach them how to improvise using the same method as I do: an immediate expression of one's interior state. This approach is inspired by my studies as an opera singer. In opera, an aria is an opportunity for a character to express their immediate thoughts, feelings, desires, in other words, their "interior state". Likewise in this work, the aria serves as an exploration of character's interior state as it is being experienced in real time, interpreted musically.

I have composed many improvised structures and performed many improvisations that experiment with this approach. In these works I express emotion, neurotic thought, abstract sensations, stress, and excitement through visceral, musical, extroverted, intimate, and sometimes literal vocalizations. However, unlike an aria these improvisations are not typically treated as a part of a larger narrative, but rather removed from any context. Typically, these works are presented as unique moments in time that are being witnessed by the audience. I wanted to create an opera in this vein wherein the characters express their "interior state" with great emotional and personal detail, while allowing the performers freedom to develop their own character's stories in real time.

In order to achieve this effect, I taught Robert and Elisabeth to connect their vocal improvisations to the interior worlds of their characters as though each improvisation was a solo operatic aria. In this sense, *Coping Mechanisms* is performed

as three solo arias being sung by three characters simultaneously without interaction (until the final moments), interrupted by instrumental breaks. The singers never explicitly explain the meaning of their characters, although the set design and costuming of the characters suggests familiar archetypes that are intended to speak to a common American domestic experience: Elisabeth portrays a housewife, Robert a lonely bachelor, and Bonnie a manic obsessive shut in. The cross section that is created by the characters and the themes of each act is couched in extra-musical narrative signifiers (i.e. sets, costumes, makeup), and invites the audience to constantly search for a storyline where there is none. Consequently the audience may project their own narratives on to the characters, revealing more about themselves than the piece in the process. In this way the true piece is positioned within the relationship between the performers, the characters, and the audience.

Another challenge was figuring out how to structure the piece with respect to Robert and Elisabeth's anxieties and inexperience. A huge aspect of this piece, therefore, was a pedagogical experiment in teaching non-improvising opera singers how to perform an improvised opera - a genre that is difficult to describe, nonetheless perform. Through their struggle I was able to revisit my first trepidations, fears, and anxieties about performing without a score and frequently found myself empathizing with their resistance.

In this dissertation I will explore the core elements that draw this piece together: In Chapter One I will address the narrative structures and signifiers. In Chapter Two I will address musical structures and the style of improvisation that is used for the piece. Chapter Three addresses the function of form in an improvised

work by discussing the "fixed elements" that give *Coping Mechanisms* its identity. In Chapter Four I will offer reflections on the experience and what it has taught me about the intersection of my identities as opera singer, composer, and improviser.

Chapter 1: Narrative

Coping Mechanisms does not tell a traditional "story" with a beginning, middle, and end. Instead it is an opportunity for the performers to explore three improvised arias related to themes about isolation and grief. In the program there is no mention of the characters' names, who they are, why they are in these spaces, what their relationships are, or what the timeframe of the piece is. Instead, the piece is designed to encourage the audience to project their own identities onto the three characters onstage. This effect is achieved through the simultaneous use of three narratives as well as extra-musical signifiers that indicate the piece is meant to be interpreted as a story, even though there is no literal story offered to the audience.

The three narratives that are improvised on for this opera are what I call "The Overall Narrative," which is made up of the specific themes that guide each movement; "Character Narratives," which is the character and story that each performer invents for themselves, and the "Sub-Narrative," the voice of each character's trauma, played by the orchestra.

In addition to the use of three intersecting narratives signifiers such as makeup, set design, costumes, and titles (Acts, Overtures, etc) imply storyline and compel the audience to make sense of the piece as a narrative.

In this chapter I will discuss the function of these narratives.

Overall Narrative

As mentioned in the introduction, *Coping Mechanisms* is in three acts, flanked by instrumental interludes from the orchestra (see Appendix, Page 37). The three acts are named "Reckoning," "Home" and "Failure." Each of these acts can be perceived as

individual arias, but each act also represents a different coping mechanism. In "Reckoning" the characters are physically experiencing shock and grief, and coping by expressing their pain through a lamentation. In "Home" they are coping through denial by avoiding their grief through isolation, eventually transferring their stress to an object. In "Failure" they are unable to move past their trauma and "act out" on their turmoil by destroying the sanctity their space. While each movement is an interpretation of a specific mechanism, the goal for the Overall Narrative was that the piece would conclude with some form of interaction between the performers, which happens at the end of "Act 3: Failure."

The way this interaction was staged for the San Diego production included Robert, Elisabeth, and Bonnie's characters in an awkward "tea party." Robert's character offers each of us a cup of the tea in the manner he has been practicing for the whole opera, and he reaches a glorious satisfaction while Elisabeth and Bonnie's characters look on with different levels of awkwardness. The orchestra comes in with a disjointed conclusion, and there is an eventual blackout. The set is revealed one last time during the postlude with empty rooms, implying this interaction has led to the characters' release from their spaces.

In the end, the Overall Narrative is defined by the themes of each act and their relationship is tied together at the end of act three with the confrontation and exit of the characters. Although their newly forged, if tenuous, relationship has given them an unknown impetus to leave their private spaces, the reasons are still undefined. It is possible that Robert killed them both and is out somewhere burying the bodies. Or more optimistically, they are all at a local pub having fun. Either way, the meeting has

prompted a significant change for the characters.

While there is no literal plot line to the piece the Overall Narrative is presented to the audience through the seemingly causal relationship of these acts - the trauma is first experienced in act one, the reaction is experienced in act two, and the failure to move past the trauma is act 3, leading to the eventual fleeing of the space. This is not an illogical interpretation of the relationship of these acts, and it is how I first explained the action to the orchestra and singers in our staging rehearsals. This Overall Narrative is the basic foundation for the score this piece, however, with a different ensemble, it could be presented in a fundamentally different way. The "score" (see Appendix, page 44) indicates that the singers must confront each other in some way by the end of the piece, but does not define how. They *could* all die from operatic murders: stabbing, poison, consumption, etc. They could step out of frame and play cards, as though they have been friends a long time. Any altered ending would change the audience's perspective on the relationship of the three acts and have a profound influence on the meaning of the piece.

Character Narrative

Many theatrical improvisation troupes improvise narratives based on situational prompts that may or may not include a character assignment. While *Coping Mechanisms'* Overall Narrative remains relatively undefined from the audience's perspective, the performers are instructed to create specific characters whose story lines are explored through the themes of the Overall Narrative. These characters are fundamental to the opera: while the Overall Narrative provides some context, the specificity of the chosen characters provides focus to the singers, their actions, and

their voices. Essentially, without information in the program to provide context, the audience is particularly reliant on the singers to inform their understanding of the characters.

Extra-musical signifiers such as set and costumes help provide context for these characters. In this production the design of the set greatly informed the characters' development. The room must match the character within it, since their room is a reflection of their interior state and personality. The set for the UCSD performance was actually chosen before the singers arrived: Stage Left was the flower room, Center Stage was the lonely room, and Stage Right was the obsessive room. We decorated the rooms to reflect common American archetypes and the singers were instructed to bring three costumes that fit these themes: Fancy housedress for the stay at home partner, work-appropriate clothes which are restricting for the person who has no life outside of work, and workout clothes for someone who is constantly promising themselves they will go to the gym, but they never leave the house.

Once in rehearsal we assigned ourselves to a room and began inventing narratives based on who we are, and what we are coping with to see which personal storyline inspired the most compelling improvisation. These characters were then stylized operatically. As indicated in the program (See Appendix, page 38), the singers were "advised to keep their gestures (physical and vocal) the realm of operatic melodrama." This means that their character had to be performed as though in an opera: all movements larger than life, grandiose in their exaggerations, and couched in emotional dramatics (so they can be perceived from a great distance, and match the tenor of the music). For example, "Act 1: Reckoning," the singers stylize their

characters as performing an operatic mad scene, vocally and physically. In order to aid the sense of operatic melodrama the performers' eyelids are painted with makeup resembling large, cartoonish eyes. This makeup forces them to use their whole face for expression and adds a layer of surrealism to the performance. The surreal performance of their characters is intended to affect the audience's perspective by allowing the characters to remain slightly outside of human imagination as a bit uncanny, and symbolic of the actions they are performing. I wanted the audience to get the impression that they were watching their own neuroses, alive and active, trapped in cages of their own design. With that in mind we developed characters that could fit the design of the room, the stylization of the performance, and have interesting interactions with the Overall Narrative.

In order to prepare for this performance Robert and Elisabeth were assigned to fill out character sheets during our workshops wherein they had to invent a character and aria based on systematic variables: Name, Age, Species, Conflict they are dealing with, What they Need, What they Want, and What Happened just before their scene begins. (See Appendix, page 44) After this they build a narrative based on that character and explore what sounds work best, they create structured musical improvisations that emphasize the struggles of the characters.

This was inspired mostly by acting exercises from college that were intended to give dimension to an actor's interpretation of their character, enhancing the details of the performance and the emotional execution. I used it to create characters that would become the basis for musical material. Note that I added the dimension "species" to broaden the creative process, and to provide them with an opportunity to

come up with more outlandish scenarios. Since the narratives were not meant to be made public, the wilder, more specific a character could be, the more fun Elisabeth and Robert might have portraying what is essentially a psychological and dark subject, helping them to overcome the anxiety about improvised performance. I encouraged Elisabeth and Robert to become lost in their characters, and in a sense, to allow their character to be the performer of the music, instead of focusing the pressure on their own personal creativity and ability.

The character narratives that were created for this opera relied heavily on these variables: who you are, what you are coping with, and what is at stake. The interaction between the Character Narratives and The Overall Narratives (combined with the stylistic elements of the sets and makeup) provide the audience with a familiar, but unknown storyline. In the gap between known and unknown elements, many audience members saw themselves in the characters onstage, relating their own coping mechanisms to one, two, or all three of the actors onstage. The successful engagement of the audience allowed for the piece to become powerful, even in the absence of formal storytelling.

Sub Narrative - The Orchestra

In the San Diego premiere of *Coping Mechanisms* the orchestra functioned mainly as accompaniment to the ensemble, providing context, mood, and emotional backbone to the entirety of the piece, not unlike the role of the orchestra in many operas. However, this led to a somewhat disjointed relationship between the singers and the orchestra, despite how well the performance went, and how fantastically the orchestra played.

In the upcoming performance in NYC the orchestra has a more active narrative role: the role of the trauma itself as it appears, disappears, and reformulates itself based on the singers' attempts to control, circumvent, and appease it. Giving the orchestra this role allows for the orchestra to do more than bind the piece and the characters together, but rather to become an agent that is constantly pressing upon the actors, who may react to the presence of the orchestra differently. The difference in the singers' reactions highlights the notion that they are performing three solo arias at the same time and creates a more compelling dynamic between each singer and the orchestra.

However, in San Diego the orchestra in was the glue of the piece, even with their somewhat undefined role. The players in San Diego (Babin, Hamann, and Nordeson) were involved in constant discussion about the feel, motivation, story, and style of the piece. In the San Diego show they performed the voice of the Overall Narrative, providing dramatic and musical structure to the events onstage, and linking the isolated singers through their playing.

Changing the role of the orchestra however changes the piece greatly. I wanted to orchestra to feel they had an equal role with the singers, however without carefully explaining their role in the narrative, the hierarchy of "singer/accompanist" began to form, which, with the limited rehearsal time, was difficult to overcome. In NYC hopefully this more specific role will encourage the players to become a more interactive part of the storyline through antagonizing, mocking, imitating, and even sympathizing with the characters as they struggle to cope with its force.

Stylistic Elements

There are several stylistic elements that help create and keep the narrative abstract, yet detailed. In the program it reads:

"The music for this piece is largely improvised, and is held together with structures relating to an opera (acts, overture, and interludes), each one having a dedicated emotional focus. The singers are advised to keep their gestures (physical and vocal) in the realm of operatic melodrama. "

We have already discussed the detailed emotional focus of each act and their themes, as well as the stylization of the characters. Here I would like to discuss the choice of terminology. Using the term "act" creates the impression of a theatrical piece with coherent intersectional content. Naming each instrumental section "Overture," "Interlude," and "Postlude" implies that the orchestra's performance is a part of the narrative, setting the mood for the story and adding dramatic emphasis. For example, the Overture's brooding tone sets the mood for the piece, and its ending signals the entrance of the performers. The sudden lack of sound at the top of the first act creates a palpable tension that is exploited by the singers' muted entrance.

Or in "Act 3: Failure", the orchestra's hectic playing drops out suddenly for the finale (the tea ceremony) which is performed in silence. This is the first silence since the end of Act 1 and it marks a high point in the narrative: the first group interaction in the opera. As the finale ends (with Bonnie picking up the cup) the orchestra re-enters and continues through the blackout for the final postlude. These emphases are a few examples of the way the orchestra interacts with the narrative, insisting that there is a coherent and intentional storyline instead of three separate pieces that could be performed independently.

Without the signifiers of "overture," "acts," and "interludes" in the program, the piece might not have been read as a narrative; the expectation of a storyline would be lost. As it was, the audience was encouraged to consider the work as a story, allowing their minds to imagine what the characters were doing, who they were, and why they were behaving the way they were. The abstraction allowed more creativity in the interpretation of the piece for the audience and for the performers, but it was partially the significance of the piece as a stylized "opera" that inspired the expectation.

Other extra-musical signifiers borrowed from opera were the use of sets, costumes, makeup, the physical movements of the actors, and the style of singing used by the performers, as discussed in the previously. In opera, the characters are often larger than life, symbolic of stereotypes and archetypes, fictional, and supernatural. Operatic story lines are dramatic, unbelievable, and can be incredibly romantic. In order to stylize the piece as an opera, the characters needed to be slightly larger than life: real and unreal, relatable and inhuman at the same time. To match, all of their physical gestures had to be unnaturally exaggerated, even though the characters obviously believe themselves to be alone.

The result is eerie: the performers are unreal, yet relatable. The set is abstract, yet specific enough to imagine what kind of people live in these spaces. The makeup keeps you at a distance, keeping the characters symbolic, funny, and sad at the same time, forcing the audience to confront which part of themselves they see in the characters.

Chapter 2: Music

As stated in the introduction the method of improvisation used for this piece involves performing the sound world of one's "interior states," in reference to how arias function in an opera. This concept provides the main thread between free improvisation and opera for this work. After developing the Overall, Character, and Sub-Narratives for the piece, the singers and orchestra are tasked with creating an improvised musical world that enhances the dramatic nature of the opera.

However, since Elisabeth and Robert had never practiced or performed free improvisation in any form, a large portion of the preparation for this piece was figuring out how to teach opera singers to improvise, and in particular, how to improvise in the style of this piece. This goal was achieved through workshopping and homework assignments that took place over the course of two years leading up to the show. These workshops and assignments were designed to teach Elisabeth and Robert a method for improvising the musical and dramatic content for a piece without a score to provide direction. This challenge caused the classically trained Elisabeth and Robert great anxiety. Despite having experience commissioning and premiering new chamber operas, Elisabeth and Robert had a staunch position against performing operas that demanded vocalization outside of our romantic era opera training: full voice, full vibrato, and acoustic projection on every pitch. While it is apropos for them to request pieces commissioned to their specific strengths, this resistance caused tension between us as performers. In order to help them branch out of the conservatory mindset, they commissioned this piece from me as a way of figuring out how their operatic voices could be relevant to non-operatic sounds.

Our workshopping was thus designed to teach them how to improvise using both operatic and non-operatic singing styles as part of their dramatic performance of the work. The workshopping was also designed to provide them with coping mechanisms for overcoming their anxiety about improvised performance, forming a meta narrative between their anxiety and the Overall Narrative of the piece itself.

Other than simply overcoming their resistance to other forms of singing, my goals for Elisabeth and Robert included developing more agency and ownership over their voices and its abilities, finding performative value in non-traditionally operatic vocal techniques, and to connect to their own voices in a way that primarily values expressiveness over a perfected reproduction of the score. I wanted them to remain as present as possible during performance; not to give in to their anxieties about the piece. Only then could they become so absorbed in their characters that their vocal improvisation would be a natural extension of their performance.

In this chapter I will explore the sound world for this opera and how the workshops and assignments aided Elisabeth and Robert in learning how to use improvisation to perform a somatic interpretation their own "interior states," as well as the states of their characters.

Workshops and Assignments - Expressing Interior States

In order to achieve the emotional connection needed for their improvised "arias" I arranged a number of workshops with Robert and Elisabeth that focused on creating vocal improvisations expressing their "interior states." In order to connect this to the function of the arias, I worked on creating exercises that promoted the concept of improvisation as an expression of "interior states" as an aria.

Some of these exercises included:

We created graphic scores of the content of our favorite arias, and then re-interpreted those scores without the aria. We explored improvising on emotional states including both the state (i.e. grief) and a scenario (i.e. my dog died). We then created improvised pieces on juxtaposed emotional states (i.e. exploring grief, then giddiness, then self-hatred).

In order to further develop their personal relationship to improvisations I assigned Elisabeth and Robert to send me journal entries focusing on any emotionally charged moment in their day. From those entries I created structures for them to improvise with, drawing on the emotional content of the journal. For example:

"Stuck in Pain" Aria

On "Why" from journal entry 1:

Perform "WHY" as if you are screaming in super slow motion on your best baritone long tone money note - make sure the "why" is very long, very expressive. Exaggerate your physical movements (arms, eyes, mouth) to enhance the feeling that you are stuck in slow motion and in pain. Feel free to add in mouthing the word (without sound), as long as your face and body remain committed to the performance of the WHY. Make note of any dramatic arcs that feel the best. Sing until you find an answer.

This prompt was initially confusing for Robert, and his reaction was to avoid the aria for two months. I realized that the emotionally based prompt was not detailed enough for him and reworked the concept as such: The word "Why" consists of three vowels: [u] [a] and [i]. The performer should sing "Why" on these vowels, in this order, on long tones that are 20-30 seconds long each, emphasizing the changing vowels, and resulting harmonic changes in the voice. The interpretation is that the performer is singing in slow motion, with an unflinching intensity that highlights every emotion experienced. I also had to narrow the limitations in order to help him

Musical and non-musical vocal style: domestic sound

The sound world of *Coping Mechanisms* was deliberately styled to reflect domestic isolation. As previously stated I wanted the audience, from the perspective of voyeurs, to see themselves in these characters who are under the impression that they are safe to behave freely in the privacy of their own homes. In order to enhance the domesticity of the piece, as well as the audience's intimacy with the characters, the singers mundane domestic gestures used a mix of "operatic," "musical" and "non-musical" sounds.

By "operatic" I am referring to sung tones from romantic opera: with resonance, projection, and vibrato stylistically related to operatic technique. "Musical" is *not* meant to imply that operatic tones are not inherently musical, rather for the purposes of this dissertation, it refers to singing styles outside of operatic performance, which Robert and Elisabeth were resistant to perform, i.e. straight tone, sprechstimme, glossolalia, and multi-phonics. "Non-musical" refers to tones that signify non-performative use of the voice: grunts, laughs, sobbing, wailing, tongue clicks, breathing, speaking, et al.

The opera offers each singer the opportunity to explore these three styles in their performance in order to experiment with how their operatic technique interacts with other styles of vocal performance. This challenged Robert and Elisabeth to widen their vocal repertoire as well as use their operatic technique to blend "musical" and "non-musical" vocalizations with stylized operatic performance.

The audience's perspective was also impacted by this mix of sounds. Many people did not know what to expect from the genre improvised opera, and how opera

singers would perform free improvisation, partly because the term "free improvisation" refers to a broad genre of music performance. Many people assumed that the music would be stylistically couched in operatic writing, with melody, harmony and other musical themes that imply operatic composition. However, I wanted the sound world for *Coping Mechanisms* to sit more firmly in free improvisation, which is not *necessarily* bound to melody and harmony but includes non-musical tones, expressive gestures, and defiance of theatrical norms. Note that at no time did I forbid melodic improvisation (after all, opera is not *always* melodic, and free improvisation is not *always* atonal), but the "interior sounds" and domestic themes of this improvisation did not inspire much melody from the performers.

There is one moment in "Act 2 : Home" where Elisabeth performs a semi-melodic riff as a domestic gesture while she prunes the fake flowers. This is one of the few moments that can be interpreted as melodic material, but it is still a domestic gesture: it reads as an aside, a vocal utterance that happens while she is preoccupied with other thoughts: a common shared experience. In a future performance it could be worth it to explore creating more gestures such as these, that imply melodic and harmonic composition.

In order to expand on this concept and explain how these "sounds" functioned in the opera, I will explore their use in each act.

Acts and Their Sounds

Each act offered different use of "opera" "musical," "non-musical" vocalizations depending on the narratives described in the previous chapter. As previously stated, each act is considered by each performer to be a solo aria that they

are performing simultaneously with little to no regard for the other singers.

The "sounds" of each act occurs as follows:

"Act 1 - Reckoning": This act begins with total physical shock, and the sounds are visceral: breath, gasps, and chokes that intended to convey the singers' temporary paralysis, as well as create tension between the singers and the audience, who expect operatic singing, or any sound whatsoever. Partway through the aria the singers begin to explore sung tones, as though the dam that held them back is breaking. In this act, the singing takes the form of a lament in that it is a visceral expression of grief. For this, the full operatic sound is well utilized, as the power and breadth of the operatic voice is frequently equated with characters who are emotionally overwhelmed to the point of present, visceral expression.

"Act 2 - Home": The sounds are intentionally introverted and domestic in order to enhance the illusion that each character is behaving as they would in the privacy of their own home. However, these sounds are still somewhat "stylized" operatically, (as required by the piece) which means even intimate sounds are projected. This projection also serves to help the orchestra hear the singers, due to their location behind the set. Halfway through the act, we structured a unison sung [i] vowel to indicate we had found our object of obsession.

"Act 3: Failure": this act provides the greatest opportunity for a mix of sounds. The heightened emotional agitation is easily expressed through any of the three sound types, and moments where the singers break into operatic tones serves to highlight the intensity of their "inner state" out of day-to-day use of the voice.

While the vocal performances are always couched in the emotional narrative of

each character, they provide ample opportunities for the singers to experiment with their full operatic sound as well as blend their technique with more untraditional vocal methods. These descriptions are not hard and fast rules for each act, rather, they reflect patterns that developed through rehearsal and workshopping.

Orchestra

There are two orchestras for *Coping Mechanisms*, one based in San Diego, and one in New York City, with respective performances in each city. In both scenarios the orchestra is made up of musicians who already work regularly in free improvisation. While *Rhymes With Opera* encouraged me to use the instrumentalists who make up the house band (the *Rhymes With Orchestra*), none of them were well versed in free improvisation. While one of the main points of this piece was to teach the singers how to improvise, I did not want to compound the difficulty with the orchestra.

For the San Diego performance the orchestra was Judith Hamann, Tommy Babin, and Kjell Nordeson, on cello, bass, and percussion respectively. In New York City the orchestra is Jeff Young, Jason Anastasoff, and Dennis Sullivan, violin, bass, and percussion respectively. The orchestration was purposely consistent between both cities as a mix of strings and percussion to ease the transition for the singers between the two venues, despite the differences in the performers' styles.

As discussed in Chapter 2, the orchestra's role differs slightly between cities, as their voice in the piece has developed over time. However musically, their styles are rooted in free improvisation which relies heavily on the personal style of the musicians. However, the NYC orchestra has the opportunity to be more influenced by the San Diego orchestra, as they are the premier orchestra, despite the fact that many

ideas from the piece first came from workshops with the NYC ensemble. The three act movement, for instance, was developed in rehearsal with the NYC players.

The San Diego musicians came in at the start of rehearsals with a general understanding of the form. We then discussed at length the themes of the piece: isolation, trauma, and coping through solitude. We talked in detail about how each movement expresses the state of the performers, and discussed the general style of the music which is grand, dramatic, decisive, and purposeful.

The orchestra in San Diego adapted their playing by exaggerating their gestures, and providing a consistent sense of tension without resolution. There is never a truly comfortable, or happy moment in the piece, and the edge in the orchestra reflects the desperation of the characters.

Instead of a score, the orchestra was provided with a brief "setlist" that listed the general form of the piece upon which they could pen their own notes. (See Appendix, page 39). In the setlist the acts are titled with theatrical and musical descriptions, instead of the titles that appear in the program. Act 1 is subtitled "Shock/Laments," Act 2 is titled "Dawn - Waltz" and Act 3 is "Needs/Destruction." These subtitles are based on conversations we had during workshopping, and indicate the mood and musical style of each movement. "Act 2- Waltz" for example, was intended to be a dreamy movement about denial with glassy, sparse elements from the orchestra played in an off-kilter rhythm that highlights the dissociative mental elements of the performers. The jerking, drunken waltz was meant to be relatively stable throughout the movement to indicate a kind of stasis within the dysfunction of the performers.

The San Diego orchestra's role was paramount in providing the characters with music that reflected the Overall Narrative. Within the orchestra's setting, the characters were free to explore their own independent Character Narratives, playing off of the tension and form provided by the orchestra. Overall, the orchestra helped to keep the piece together dramatically, and provide a sturdy backbone for the sound world of the opera with their idiosyncratic styles as experienced improvising musicians.

Chapter 3: Fixed Elements / The Score

While there was no official score for the April 4th performance of *Coping Mechanisms*, a number of fixed elements helped ground the performance of the piece. Some of these elements have already been discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, namely the execution of the three narratives, stylistic elements (makeup, costumes, set, and form), and the musical themes for each act. However, after developing the general form of the piece which gives the piece an identity we created a more specific structure for our performance that relied heavily on the lighting design. Essentially, the lighting design was our "score" for the opera.

After the Overall Narrative for the piece had been set, Lily Bartenstein, the lighting director, and Cynthia Stokes, the director, collaborated on the cue sheet for the opera (See Appendix, pages 40-43). Each cue either triggered an event onstage (the beginning/ends of the acts, changes in the dramatic and musical material, silences, and outbursts) or responded to an event onstage (i.e. blackout after the singers pull down the plastic curtain at the end of Act 1, beginning the first interlude). Most of the former cues were fixed to move at certain intervals (follow cues), however several live cues helped give the piece room to breathe (these live cues are outlined in the cue sheet with yellow).

The lighting cue sheet determined the timing for the entire piece, and narrowed the dramatic structure considerably, giving guidelines for the amount of time a certain section or act would be performed. Despite the obvious musical constrictions of this method, the lighting also provided a way for the singers to synchronize with each other and the orchestra. However, this cue sheet is specific to our performance,

and would not be required if a different ensemble wished to stage the opera.

Essentially, there are two versions of the same piece: one is a score of the fixed elements that defines our interpretation of the piece, represented by the lighting cue sheet. The other, which was (and because of workshopping only could be) written after the performance was finished, defines which elements of the show must be fixed in order for another group to perform it. (See Appendix, page 43). In the latter score the fixed elements are: the number of musicians (3 orchestra members, 3 singers, but not what instruments are needed), the number of acts, their mechanisms, the Overall Narrative, the confrontation at the end of Act III, a shot of the empty rooms, the construction of Character Narratives, and a set consisting of three rooms that reflect the characters of the singers. With only these fixed elements another group could present a wildly different version of the piece.

For example, the formation of the rooms and the location of the orchestra could change; the material of the walls could alter as well as the characters, their story lines, and their spaces. The score does not prevent musicians from adding other elements to the piece. For example, I wanted to have live actors portray disembodied arms through holes in the walls of the set, which would occasionally interact with the characters. Or perhaps silent actors in each space with whom the characters interact.

In general, other performers are welcome to adapt the score in whatever way they like. The purpose of this piece is to stimulate and engage the ensemble in new and unusual ways, and by leaving the content open the opportunity for ensemble collaboration is greater.

Composing the Piece

The composition of *Coping Mechanisms* was intended to be created through group improvisation, much like improvised dance pieces which are often structured through exploratory improvisations. However, our geography prevented us from rehearsing regularly and due to a lack of content, I found it hard to come up with descriptions for the piece when we began advertising it in 2016. I composed countless potential structures for this piece that attempted to blend the intended theme (coping through isolation) with structures that would give Elisabeth, Robert, and the orchestra room to act as improvisers instead of as interpreters. For example, I created different "Overall Structures" for the piece such as: the three characters have been abducted by aliens and are on display in their zoo, or, a version of the piece where the singers are constantly looking for a way to escape barren rooms, but a villainous lighting design keeps shutting them off when they are close to escape. The very first version of the score called for five rooms, all open towards each other. The performers were to be bound by two main constructs: pretending not to see each other, and a formal structure of solos, duets, and arias, each with improvised content.

However, many of those concepts were abandoned due to how poorly they performed in workshops. In February 2017 I spent two weeks in New York City testing out which structures were viable, but it was not until we brought in the orchestra and began improvising as an ensemble that the three act structure fell into place. This group exploration mirrors the composition method of many improvised pieces I have previously created - combining conceptual purpose with the dramatic and musical idiosyncrasies of the individual performers.

The Set and The Audience

The set and the audience perspective were fixed elements in our production: The audience was positioned to watch the singers perform from the perspective of neighboring voyeurs, an effect that was enhanced by the wire mesh set. The set was designed with semi-transparent walls that allowed the audience to view all the actors and the orchestra at all times. The audience was able to compare the behaviors of the characters' individual arias simultaneously, as though the characters were lab rats in an experiment. Any semi-obstructed view (due to props and design) enhanced the voyeurism of the audience.

This relationship between the audience and performers encouraged the singers to portray characters who were "not performing" for the benefit of the audience, but rather, the spying audience was catching snippets out of their daily lives. This effect of seeing someone out of context hearkens back to my original concept for vocal improvisation: the singer's "inner state" is being performed as a moment in one's reality, instead of as a part of a story. While the relationship between the audience and singers (voyeurs and subjects) should not be compromised there are many ways in which the set could be altered to portray that relationship. For example, the opera could take place in someone's home: with each singer occupying one room and the orchestra performs over an intercom from another room, or with one orchestra member with them in each room- while the audience watching on from security cameras, or through a window.

Final Structure

Overall, finalizing which structure would inspire the most specific and focused

performance without prescribing the exact motions and opportunities for each singer was the most difficult aspect of this composition, particularly given the lack of regular access to the performers. Part of this difficulty was exacerbated by my desire to have Elisabeth, Robert, and the orchestra feel as though the piece was being tailored precisely to their styles and abilities as performers, as well as Robert and Elisabeth's general resistance to improvising. They frequently requested as much structure as I could possibly give them, inhibiting their own contribution to the piece.

The workshopping thus was mostly trial and error: if Robert and Elisabeth balked or were unable to be inspired by the prompt, I had to change its structure. After two years of sporadic workshopping, the *Coping Mechanisms* premier was indeed the best version of the piece. The finalized structure of the piece is largely due to the help of the director, Cynthia Stokes, who frequently pressed upon me to quickly make hard decisions. Although some of those decisions were altered after trying them out, they allowed us to go further into the piece rather than continuing to overhaul the way it was being structured.

Cynthia has worked on many improvised theatrical pieces, and her expertise in this area was very important, not just for the sake of the piece, but for our work as an ensemble. It was incredibly difficult for me to navigate the many roles I had assigned myself. By allowing her to take over the dramatic structure of the piece in the final rehearsals the piece was given the concrete shape it had previously lacked.

Lily's lighting designs also played a huge role in the final structure of the piece. She was able to synthesize the wishes of the director, the performers, and the music to create a surreal, eerie setting for the piece. With the darkness of the black box framing

the set, the lack of context was more pronounced. With the wire mesh (Lily's creation) the voyeurism of the audience was enhanced, and the sense that the singers were trapped in cages was more explicit. Due to their expert contributions the looks and feel of *Coping Mechanisms* was a complete and absorbing work for the audience and performers.

Chapter 4: Reflections on Performance

This performance was indeed an experiment and with it there were wonderful surprises and unexpected challenges. While I am happy with and grateful for the opportunity to present an ambitious piece such as this both in San Diego and New York City, it also presented me with many challenges relating to my role as a composer, teacher, coach, and performer.

One frustrating challenge for me was the inevitable settling of the piece. During the dress rehearsal, the piece began to give in to repetitive gestures that Elisabeth and Robert felt comfortable performing. This was partially due to the specificity of the lighting plot, the instruction of the director, and the intersection of the Overall Narrative with the Character Narratives. Robert and Elisabeth had also only recently found a vocal sound world that they could recognize as their own, and they were inclined to stick to the new techniques that worked for them. In many ways this "settling" was inevitable, and it was the smartest move for the piece. In fact, there are places where additional structures could benefit the piece more. For example, there could be places for planned unison vocalizations as well as more deliberate attempts to pair up performers and orchestra members.

However, an opportunity to shake up the developed stasis would be, for a future version, to exchange rooms while either keeping or changing the characters, or to only choose the rooms and characters just before going onstage, allowing a fresh perspective to drive the piece.

While this was an experiment in teaching opera singers to lend their voices to free improvisation, there were many instances where I was met with unusually stark

resistance from Elisabeth and Robert. After one of our summer workshops in 2016 (during which we worked on combining emotional affect with improvisation), Elisabeth and Robert both told me bluntly that they would not practice improvising on their own. Essentially, they needed me to write something for them to improvise on, as well as provide them with strict deadlines as to when it would be finished.

Elisabeth claimed she would not practice because without a deliberate prompt the will to improvise was not there. Robert was resistant to improvise at home where his roommates could hear him. "It was a ludicrous idea at the time," he later admitted. Even though I wanted them to explore free improvisation without prompts, I acquiesced to the assignments and wrote them the arias listed in Chapter 2. However, even then they did not send me material for almost two months, and then only after re-writing and explaining the prompts in much greater detail.

The process of the piece was overwhelming and intimidating for them. Creating their own musical material caused a lot of strain their conception of their role within their own performance practice. The prospect of "composing" their own material was intimidating partially because the hierarchies of classical opera taught them that composers create the content, and performers deliver the most compelling rendition of their work. Elisabeth admitted in our first rehearsal that since she is not a composer she could not imagine that she was able to create compelling music. This composer-performer relationship founded Rhymes With Opera: the full company includes composers Ruby Fulton and George Lam, who originally recruited us three as the singers for the group. Our intention as a quintet was to provide opportunities for Fulton's and Lam's pieces to be performed, only later expanding to include

commissions from other composers.

This season is the first season a performer from the Rhymes With Opera ensemble has "crossed over" to composer status, a term I am not wholly comfortable with. Since my goal was to assign more creative responsibility to Robert and Elisabeth I was frequently frustrated with their resistance, which was couched in their desire to place me firmly into the role of composer. This makes some sense on several levels - the first being that this was a paid commission from Rhymes With Opera, the second being that to Robert and Elisabeth, I am an expert in improvisation and my expertise was needed to validate their improvisations and push them to move past their fears. This need for validation reminded me of my early days with experimental works that involved my own compositional creativity, and the fear of failure that I experienced when I began improvising. Coming from a strict classical upbringing I was daunted by the notion I could create my own work, and that any improvisations I had to offer would reek of professional inexperience. The threat of deep embarrassment loomed over my first performance of John Cage's "Aria" because I felt that my exposed creative choices would be ridiculed, or worse, boring.

I empathized greatly with Robert and Elisabeth over their anxieties, and often met them halfway in their need for "more structure." While it was hard for me to fulfill the role of "composer," it challenged me to articulate thoughts and ideas that seemed second nature to me. Over the course of our workshops I had not only taught Robert and Elisabeth to overcome their anxiety about improvising, but I also had to cope with my anxiety in the role of composer: making firm decisions about what I wanted, being clear in my explanations, and insisting on what I knew I wanted from a position of

authority. This last task was especially difficult for me since I wanted the piece to be extremely collaborative: I found it difficult to admit my inflexibilities to myself more than to the other performers.

However, another complication arose near the end of the production where I realized that I had not worked out my own character for the show. I had been saddled with too many roles in this piece: composer, improvisation teacher, performer, musical director, producer, and stage manager. Balancing these roles made it difficult for me to find myself in the performance.

The responsibility of a multi-dimensional role contributed to the lack of development for the orchestra. Although I am not in any way disappointed with the San Diego orchestra, their voice (which was discussed in Chapter 2) remained partially undeveloped because I lacked a musical director for the show. Without a musical director (who was not also performing in the cast) there was no one to insist on the development of that relationship in rehearsal, and to offer their objective ear towards ways to make the relationship more interesting. As a member of Rhymes With Opera, who has put on staged works for almost ten years now, I have learned about the importance of theatrical hierarchy: it is simply too overwhelming to play multiple roles for such a large, multifaceted production.

However, after the performance, many audience members approached me to tell me that they were moved by how much they identified with the characters, and that the piece challenged the way they view their own coping mechanisms. One audience member asked me if all three of the characters were based on him, and whether or not I had written the piece as a passive aggressive message about his

behavior. The experiment of keeping the characters abstract enough to invite projection from the audience was a success; the relationship between the audience and the characters is where the core of the piece truly lies.

After the performance Robert and Elisabeth remarked about how much the piece has changed them. Robert claims the piece encouraged him to be more playful in his solo work, using improvisation as a compositional tool. Elisabeth has expanded her vocabulary to include extended techniques, and is more open minded to performing compositions that involve non-operatic vocalizations. Further, she was pleased that she did not feel as though she was merely dabbling in improvisation as an opera singer, but rather extended her skill as an opera singer through improvisation. Most importantly, the piece unified us as a performing ensemble, with the ability to react, relate, and create together in real time.

Conclusions

Through creating this piece I learned a lot about structuring theatrical, improvised pieces as well as what makes something a "composition" at all. Throughout the process and performance the performers never lost their need to be present, alert, engaged, and creative. I created a situation wherein Robert and Elisabeth were forced to develop their own music, their own characters, and develop a narrative for those characters and the audience without the aid of a score. Although throughout the creation of this piece I was essentially the "composer," I still feel as though the piece was made collaboratively, relying on and inspiring each performers' individual styles.

The largest difficulty in creating the piece was mixing theater with free

improvisation. By figuring out which elements should be fixed or mutable, and how those elements impact the audience's experience the creation of a similar piece could now be expedited using a similar method. The makeup, the set, the behaviors and exaggerated gestures of the performers gave the audience an uncomfortable and familiar space within which to confront their own coping mechanisms, both through seeing themselves in the characters, and through their reactions to those characters' awkward behaviors.

The successes of this show outweigh the challenges: as an ensemble, Elisabeth, Robert, and I began to listen to each other musically, personally, and dramatically in ways we had not previously. Elisabeth and Robert were challenged to create their own musical and dramatic material, to trust their instincts as performers, and found themselves exploring new creative methods of singing that they had not considered before.

The eerie, surreal quality of the music was matched by the incredible talents of Lily Bartenstein, whose set and lighting design perfectly complemented the abstract nature of the piece. Cynthia Stokes' direction helped Robert, Elisabeth, and I to create characters with our whole body and voice - her experience directing improvised, theatrical works helped us ground the piece as a performance by guiding the development of our characters physical attributes.

Coping Mechanisms will have its second run in New York City May 19th and 20th 2017 and will be adapted for a new space with different musicians. I am looking forward to seeing what changes happen and how they affect the structure of the piece.

Appendix, page 44, page 37

Program Page 1

COPING MECHANISMS

AN IMPROVISED OPERA
BY BONNIE LANDER

OVERTURE

ACT I : RECKONING

INTERLUDE

ACT II : HOME

INTERLUDE

ACT III : FAILURE

POSTLUDE

CAST: ELISABETH HALLIDAY, ROBERT MARIL, BONNIE LANDER
ORCHESTRA: JUDITH HAMANN, TOMMY BABIN, KJELL NORDESON
LIGHTING AND SET: LILY BARTENSTEIN DIRECTOR: CYNTHIA STOKES

Program - Page 2

Composer Notes:

Thank you for coming!

This opera is a very special work for me. Not only is it my first full length composition, but it is also the first full length composition that I never composed. I have found that even though no one knows what the phrase "improvised opera" means, the concept elicits strange reactions from people as they try to imagine what it could be.

Coping Mechanisms is an exploration of modern life interpreted as voluntary loneliness. I've met many people who react to hardship with various levels of retreat, only to find their pain exacerbated by the solitude. This piece attempts to highlight the frustration of this particular coping mechanism, and explores the physical and mental relationships to stress, anxiety, fear, and grief.

The three singers will first experience their grief viscerally in Act I. They will then try to process their grief through distance in Act II, and in Act III will explore the failures of their efforts.

The music for this piece is largely improvised, and is held together with structures relating to an opera (acts, overture, and interludes), each one having a dedicated emotional focus. The singers are advised to keep their gestures (physical and vocal) in the realm of operatic melodrama.

I am very fortunate to have the friends, colleagues, and mentors to make this strange and unusual show happen. Many thanks to the Rhymes With Opera team, Lily Bartenstein, Cynthia Stokes, Jessica Flores, Judith Hamann, Tommy Babin, Kjell Nordeson, Lyndsay Bloom, Anthony Burr, Anthony Davis, Shahrokh Yadegari, John Fonville, Amy Cimini, Alan Burrett, Bob Pierzak, Leslie Leytham, Brendan Nguyen, Jonathan Nussman, Leah and Phil Bowden, Clint McCallum, Mom and Dad, Steven Townsend, and all the others who helped make this piece possible.

Coping Mechanisms - Set List

Coping Mechanisms - Set List

Overture -

about 3 minutes long.
culminates with tremolo/crash in drums

Act 1 - Shock/Laments -

the shock of the news/lament/wilting
ends with silence
singers rip down curtain/blackout

Interlude -

Act 2 - Dawn - Waltz

Interlude or Attaca -

Act 3 - Needs/Destruction

Lighting Cue Sheet Page 1

CUE	Time	Follow	
5	3		Preshow
			audience settles, is there a reshow announcement track?
9	3	5	blackout
10	3		orchestral overture
			singers go to places
			Orchestra finishes
11	12	45	spotlights sequence
12	8/12	35	
13	8/12	40	
14	8/12	25	
	8/12		
	8/12		
15	8/12	20	
16	8/12	15	
17	8/12	1:00	
20	30	1:30	sidelight adds
21	15	1:00	pin spots go away
25	15		add footlight
			singers tear down plastic
30	3		blackout
31	3	2:30	orchestral interlude
35	20	3:00	add cool light on singers
			silent physical activity
40	6	4:00	slashes of light

Lighting Cue Sheet Page 2

			they discover sound
50	6	2:00	3 toplight rectangles
			obsession over objects
55	15	10	footlight sequence
56	15	10	
57	15	25	
			move objects to spots
59	3/20	22	resolve into pin spots
60	0	3	blackout
65	12	2:00	orchestral interlude
68	12	1:30	blue light
			dissatisfied frogs
70	12	2:00	light builds into their spaces, they expand vocally
71	8	38	add squares
71.5	30		squares get brighter
			they discover the grates
			B & E see each other through the grates and jump backwards Surprised!
72	0	9	blackout
73	0	10	restore: footlight
74	0	9	blackout
74.3	0	10	restore
74.6	0	9	blackout
75	2		restore
			orchestra stops
			singers have a tea ceremony
			orchestra begins playing again

Lighting Cue Sheet Page 3

			30 seconds after orchestra begins again
76	0	0	blackout
			singers exit
			when singers are clear of the stage
78	12		lights up on empty rooms
			orchestra plays
			orchestra finishes
80	5		blackout
85	3		bows
90	3		houselights

Coping Mechanisms - Final Score

Coping Mechanisms - The Score

For: 3 vocalists and 3 instrumentalists

Vocalists:

In this piece each singer chooses a character to portray. Each character must have a name, age, species, and major conflict that is the purpose of their coping mechanisms. Further characteristics may be used such as: gender, what they want, what they need, and what is at stake for them in the opera. The singers improvise the music for each act as though it is a solo aria (performing the thoughts, feelings, and emotions of the character), and they perform with the illusion that they cannot see or hear each other until the confrontation in the third act.

Orchestra:

The orchestra plays the role of the conflict. They can either portray one conflict that each singer responds to, or can be assigned to one singer specifically. In either case, they represent the way the conflict manifests in the performers minds throughout the opera.

The set:

The set is comprised of three rooms for each character. The placement of the orchestra is open: they could be in a fourth room, behind the set, or one of each performer in a room with the singer, or another configuration. However, the rooms must match the characters the singers choose, or vice versa (the singers can create characters based on stylized rooms).

The piece:

The piece is performed in three acts, flanked by instrumental breaks as follows:
Overture, Act 1 : Reckoning, Interlude, Act 2 : Home, Interlude, Act 3 : Failure, Postlude
The Overall Narrative that drives the piece is determined by the content of the acts intersecting with the characters chosen by the singers:

Act 1: The physical reaction to the conflict

Act 2 : The denial of the conflict which transmutes into referring the conflict onto an object in your space

Act 3: Failure to cope with the conflict results in the destruction of the space. This act must end with a confrontation between the performers which happens in silence.

Notes:

The instrumental interludes set up the mood for each act, provide narrative transition, and reflect any change in the state of the characters' conflict between acts.
During the postlude the rooms should be shown empty of the singers.
The piece can be as long or as short as needed, with any amount of lighting and set design, and should involve no small amount of dramatic interpretation.

Character Sheet Example 1

Elisabeth #1

Aria:	Data Aria
Character (Name):	Elisabot
Representation:	Loss of humanity
Wants:	To complete all the tasks
Needs:	To feel productive
Whats at Stake:	humanity
Key Phrase(s):	"Time", "no"

What Happened Just before Aria Started	Received assignment from human Elisabeth
--	--

Sections

1. Settling into being a robot	5. Take the pill
2. Introduce pressures of Time	6. Repeat 1-5
3. Productivity	7. Robot's time runs out
4. Breakdown	

Vocalisations/ Body gestures to go with sections

1. Gearing up to be a robot: tapping, then complete rhythms with hands. Facial expressions → neutral.	5. Says "no" to humanity. Hand movements stop, leans back, mouth open, to take The Pill.
2. Mono-syllables emerge unconsciously, like talking in one's sleep.	6. Repeat 1-5
3. Short, semi-satisfied "time"s.	7. Robot pulled away as The Pill loses its effectiveness, end of the Robot and of productivity.
4. Human facial expressions start to emerge, hand rhythms begin to break down.	